
**Obedience to Christ
Gives Assurance of the
Truth of His Doctrines**

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Archibald Alexander (1772-1851) was born in Virginia and raised in a home with a strong Presbyterian heritage. He was converted at the age of seventeen and then studied theology under William Graham at Liberty Hall Academy. Upon licensure, he served as an itinerant missionary in Virginia and North Carolina, which generated a life-long passion for home and foreign missions. After a short settled pastorate, he served as president of Hampden-Sydney College (1796-1807) in his native Virginia, then ministered in the Pine Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia (1807-1812). Alexander was appointed to serve as the first "Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology" at Princeton Theological Seminary, upon its establishment in 1812. The remaining years of his life were spent as professor in the first Presbyterian seminary founded in the United States. He is best remembered today as an experiential preacher, teacher, and author of Reformed truth.

Obedience to Christ Gives Assurance of the Truth of His Doctrines

“If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God.”

—John 7:17

The truth of the gospel is established by two kinds of evidence: external and internal. The former is historical, and depends on the testimony of men to the miracles wrought in confirmation of the Christian religion, and the fulfillment of prophecies, which furnish conclusive evidence of the truth of any doctrine. The nature of this kind of proof is very obvious. If God, by the exertion of His power, in a miraculous way gives attestation to the declarations of any person, then we

know that that person speaks the truth; for God, we are sure, will not give His attestation to an impostor, or to that which is false. People, however, may be well acquainted with this species of evidence, and yet know little of the truths contained in the Bible or entertain very erroneous ideas of the nature of the truths revealed. Thus, in fact, we find men who have examined the external evidences of Christianity, and have been by this means fully convinced of its truth, differing entirely in their views of the doctrines of revelation.

In this there is nothing unaccountable, as this kind of evidence does not bring before the mind the truths revealed, but is external to them. While two men are equally convinced that the Christian religion is from God on account of the miracles performed, the record of which has come down to us, well attested, and on account of the numerous prophecies which have been exactly fulfilled, they

may nevertheless interpret the Bible on very different principles, and consequently arrive at very different conclusions. Or, the one may attentively study the contents of the Bible while the other pays no serious attention to the subject and remains ignorant of the true system of doctrines taught in this book.

But in regard to the internal evidence of Christianity in the heart, the case is different. The evidence here arises from a view of the truth itself, and can only be fully appreciated by a mind under divine illumination. This evidence may indeed convince any rational mind not under the influence of strong prejudice, by an exhibition of the perfection of the theory of theology and morality that the Bible contains. It can easily be shown that this theory is far more perfect than that of any of the heathen sages; and yet the writers were destitute of human learning, and unaided, were utterly incapable of producing such admirable works. By an argu-

ment of this kind, Jenyns has demonstrated the truth of Christianity. This mode of reasoning can be appreciated by every rational mind.

But there is another species of internal evidence, perceived and felt only by such as enjoy the illumination of the Holy Spirit. This arises from a view of the truth itself—from a discernment of its beauty and glory, and also from a consciousness of its salutary effects on the heart. This is the kind of evidence on which saving faith is founded. It is a kind of evidence which can be appreciated by the weak and unlearned as readily as by the greatest scholars and philosophers. In regard to it, all stand upon a level—or, rather, the simple and unlearned possess the advantage, for the pride of reason and of human science stands very much in the way of the exercise of faith. In accordance with this, our Savior says, “I thank thee, O Father...because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and

hast revealed them unto babes” (Matt. 11:25). For it is an established rule in God’s government to resist the proud and to cast contempt on the wisdom of this world. As says the Scripture, “God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and...the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty” (1 Cor. 1:27).

Many suppose that plain, uneducated Christians who know little or nothing of history and are therefore unable to appreciate the force of the external evidence in favor of Christianity have no rational foundation for their faith, but merely receive the Scriptures because they have heard from their parents and teachers that they are the Word of God. That many in Christendom have no better foundation for their faith than this is readily admitted, but the real Christian, whose mind has been enlightened by the Spirit of God, believes the Scriptures to be the Word of God on the best and highest

evidence, on the testimony of God Himself. For when the truth is apprehended in its spiritual nature by a divine light shining on it, it manifests itself to be the Word of God because it bears the impress of God on its face.

A blind man may be fully convinced that the sun exists because thousands testify to the fact, and because, though he does not see this great luminary of day, he feels warmth from its rays. So men blind to spiritual things may be fully and rationally convinced that Christ was a divine teacher and the Son of God, by many conclusive arguments. But as the blind man remains ignorant of the visible appearance of the sun, which is perceived by every child who has eyes, so unrenewed men—men destitute of spiritual life, however intellectual and learned—remain blind to the true nature of spiritual objects. The humblest, weakest believer possesses a better knowledge of the true character of Christ than can be

attained by any exercise of reason. This is humbling to human pride, and men of the world are disposed to disbelieve the statement; but its truth is proved by the effects produced by the different kinds of knowledge. "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matt. 7:20).

Speculative or mere natural knowledge of scriptural truths—not penetrating into the true excellence of the truths believed, but resting on the external evidences and systematic relations of the truth—exercises little influence on the heart and affections, whereas spiritual or saving knowledge, by which the beauty and glory of divine things are apprehended, has the immediate effect of exciting the affections and emotions in a way corresponding with the nature of the objects perceived. Under the influence of new and holy feelings, the purpose of the heart to honor, worship, and obey God is formed, and this purpose becomes habitual; and the clearer the soul's

views of divine things, the firmer and stronger this purpose becomes. The person thus enlightened and affected is renewed—converted—and all his pursuits, his hopes and fears, his joys and sorrows, are different from what they were before. Old things are done away, and all things are new.

From what has been said, we may learn the true import of the text—“If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God”—which may be thus paraphrased: If any man possesses that state of mind which will prompt and lead him to choose the service of God, and determine to obey Him, he will be at no loss respecting the truth of My doctrine; for he will have such a view of the excellency of the truth which I deliver and will possess such a conviction of his own sinful and helpless condition, that he will at once be persuaded of the divine origin of the plan of redemption, from its perfect adaptation to

his own urgent needs. And if he obtains such a view of the purity and perfection of the commandments of God as to delight in the law of God after the inner man, and to resolve to render universal obedience, he will entertain no doubt about the truth of My precepts, which are nothing else than an exposition and application of the law of God. And whoever does the will of God from the heart will experience a pleasure so pure and soul-satisfying that he will be sure it must proceed from the eternal fountain of felicity, according to that of the Psalmist, "In keeping thy commandments there is a great reward," and according to the words of Christ, "my yoke is easy and my burden is light," and of the apostle John, "his commandments are not grievous."

Suppose a man is brought to the fixed purpose to obey the will of God and to proceed daily in His service, delighted with the law in all its precepts. Such a person will experience great peace of mind,

and the joy arising from the exercise of holy affections will have an internal evidence of the truth of religion that no unregenerate man can possess, or well conceive of. For such affections and such obedience are contrary to the bent and inclination of his soul, and he can scarcely believe that there can be a real pleasure in those exercises for which he has no taste. He may, indeed, admit that, if there exists a strong relish for such pursuits, there may be pleasure; but he is apt to be incredulous about the existence of an ardent love of the service of God. For the most part, he views religion to be a constraint which men place on themselves—a yoke hard to bear.

A number of people brought up in a dark cave into which the rays of the sun never entered, if brought out when this luminary was shining in its brightness, would need no arguments to prove its existence; they would have the evidence in themselves in the shining of the light

into their eyes; or, if placed where they could not see the sun, yet, where there was a reflection of its rays, they would need no other evidence of its existence. Christians are described as people brought from darkness to “marvelous light,” as being “light in the Lord.” Now, if this divine and spiritual light has shined into their hearts, to give them the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ—will they be at any loss to know whence this divine light proceeds? Can they ascribe these new views to any other source than to the Father of lights from whom comes down every good gift and every perfect gift (James 1:17)?

When the mind is in a right state—that is, when it is freed from the blindness of nature, and has the eyes of the understanding opened—the light of the glorious gospel will shine into it, revealing the beauties of holiness and causing it to rejoice in the glory of God. To such a per-

son, Christ appears lovely, the chief among ten thousand, and He becomes the jewel of their hearts. Idols are at once cast away, and He is enthroned as the rightful King of their affections. If believers doubt of their own sincerity, yet they do not and cannot doubt of Christ's excellency and suitableness. His doctrines they humbly receive, and they found their hopes of salvation on His faithful Word alone. The doctrine of Christ is not merely what He taught as a prophet, but it is also the doctrine which respects Himself. Christ Himself is the center, the substance of Christian doctrine. His divinity, His incarnation, His holy life and miraculous works, His sufferings and humiliation, His crucifixion as an atonement for sin, His resurrection and ascension, and His glorification—these truths which relate to Christ's person and work, are known to be divine by everyone who is truly enlightened by the Spirit of God.

Everyone who does the will of the Father in heaven is thus enlightened, and receives, simply and cordially, the whole doctrine of Christ as far as he is instructed in the Holy Scriptures. He has received an unction which teaches him all these things—that is, a spiritual illumination—so that without the authority of any man or any church, he knows by an internal evidence that these doctrines which relate to Christ, are true, and that they came from God. To know the truth, to embrace it cordially, to love it sincerely, and to be molded to conform with it—this is what constitutes one a true Christian.

Error can never supply the place of truth. You might as well expect the body to be nourished by poisons as the soul by error. Truth is sometimes mixed with error in doctrines taught to the people; and if the errors are not fundamental, the truth which accompanies them may prove nourishing. But its efficacy will always be hindered or impaired by error in

proportion to its magnitude and prevalence in the system. In order to salvation, Christ's doctrine must be known and cordially embraced. All God's children are taught by Him. "Ye shall know the truth," says Christ, "and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

Apostasy is nothing else but a denial of and departure from the truth, once professed. Those judicially abandoned of God, and given up to believe a lie that they might be condemned, are such as "received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved" (2 Thess. 2:10). Christ declares, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). All truth as well as life dwells in Him as in its fountain. And every obedient believer is made to know something of the excellence of the truth so that he can say with Paul, "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:8). Every true believer has the witness in himself. He needs no

external evidence to convince him of the truth of the gospel. As he needs no proof that the sun exists and is the source of light when it shines into his eyes, so, when the light of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, the image of God, shines into his heart, he knows that this spiritual light proceeds from the Sun of righteousness. Thus, every true Christian, however weak and unlearned, has a solid and rational foundation for his faith, and there is no other foundation on which a saving faith can rest. Many saw the wonderful miracles done by Jesus Christ and yet remained His enemies; and many now believe without a doubt that these miracles were worked, on the testimony of eye witnesses and from the effects produced by Christianity on the state of the world. They have no doubt, but that many prophecies are proved to be from God, because they have been exactly and literally fulfilled. And yet these people remain under the predominant influence

of the love of the world! "No man can say that Jesus is the Christ, but by the Holy Ghost" (1 Cor. 12:3).

In all countries and in all religions, the majority of the people have a traditional faith. They believe as they have been instructed, and seldom doubt of the truth of their religion, which, however, they receive implicitly, without any examination. The majority in Christendom receive the Christian religion on no better evidence, for although it is attended with convincing evidences of its divine origin, they are not acquainted with these. But let us suppose a person has grown to adulthood with no other than this traditional faith, and is brought under a deep conviction that he is a sinner and that he can do nothing to remove the sentence of condemnation under which he lies or to restore his corrupt nature to purity and perfection. To such a convicted sinner, the most important inquiry is, "What must I do to be saved?"

He hears the gospel. He learns that by believing on Christ, the Son of God, he may obtain everlasting life. At first, the news seems to be too good to be true. He fears that there is some mistake in the matter. But now the Spirit of God enlightens his mind to understand the gospel method of salvation. He sees that the atonement of Christ is sufficient to satisfy all the demands of law and justice. He sees that the door of reconciliation is wide open, that he is invited and entreated to be reconciled unto God, and that the greatness and number of his sins are no barrier to the free exercise of mercy. And he not only sees and believes that Christ is in all respects a suitable Savior, just such a one as he needs, but he sees a divine glory shining in the face of Jesus Christ, by which he is so attracted, and his thoughts so occupied, that he forgets about himself. He is absorbed in the contemplation of the wisdom, love, justice, and faithfulness of God, as these

attributes shine in the work of redemption. Under these believing views, his affections are strongly moved. He feels a love to God in Christ springing up in his heart, such as he never felt to any other. His soul is ravished with a unique joy, which, as to kind or degree, cannot be described. At this moment, he gives himself away to God. He has a fixed purpose formed in his heart: to honor and obey his Lord and Master, come what may.

Has this person no rational evidence of the truth of the Christian religion? There may be a question whether this evidence ought to be considered rational, for although it satisfies the rational mind, it is an evidence not owing to the deductions of reason, or any logical process. Rather, it arises from the supreme excellence of divine truth revealed to the soul, by the illumination of the Holy Spirit. This man knows certainly that the doctrine of the gospel is of God. This is the divine anointing, which if a man pos-

sesses, he needs no one to witness to him that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and the Savior of the lost. For the evidence is complete, and this faith which he exercises in Christ, as thus exhibited, is "the faith of God's elect" (Titus 1:1).

But all do not attain to those clear spiritual discoveries here described. Some have only dim views of divine truth, and their faith is in proportion weak; but in the use of appointed means it gains strength, and that which was feeble in the beginning will grow up to maturity. Few of those who are at first favored with bright spiritual discoveries of the glory of Christ continue to enjoy these clear views for long at one time. The blessed vision passes away. They fall back, if not into distressing darkness, yet into an obscure twilight. This is necessary, lest they should conclude that these spiritual views were their own and depended on themselves. And as spiritual pride is apt to rise and swell in consequence of the

delightful exercises of mind which the soul enjoys, it is expedient that God should withdraw those views, in a measure, and leave it to feel its own weakness and unworthiness.

When the soul is made to glimpse the depth of its depravity and to feel sin, on account of its turpitude, to be a burden, this very conviction furnishes a strong evidence of the divine authority of the Scripture; it is by the law, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, that this knowledge often is acquired. The enlightened soul can no more doubt that sin does really partake of the evil seen in it than it can doubt its own existence. But if this conviction is true and correct, then certainly, the word which has produced it must be the Word of God. No word of man could ever thus affect the conscience and search out the secret faults of the heart. The effect of the truth on an awakened conscience is wonderful. It divides between the soul and the spirit, and "is a discerner

of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). When the faithful preaching of the gospel is heard by someone just beginning to seriously consider his ways, it often seems that the preacher has the power of searching the heart, or that someone has communicated to the preacher information respecting his personal character. All deep conviction of sin, therefore, furnishes a direct proof of the truth of the Word.

And when we consider how completely the feeling of guilt and condemnation is removed by faith in Christ, and what secret peace takes possession of the mind, we are sure that words which can produce such an effect must be from God; for where else do we find such effects produced? Whatever others may think, the believer himself cannot doubt that views which have so suddenly charmed away his grief must be from God. There is no change in nature more remarkable than that produced on the feelings of a con-

victed and distressed sinner by the simple exercise of faith in Christ. It is a change from overwhelming sorrow to unspeakable joy; from darkness to marvelous light; from condemnation to reconciliation; from enmity to friendship—in short, from spiritual death to spiritual life. The enlightened and renewed man has then the very best evidence of the truth of Christ's doctrine, an evidence which no other can possess until enlightened by the same Spirit. And now, suppose the person thus renewed by the grace of God never heard or knew anything of the external evidences of Christianity. Even if he were to suppose that the gospel was of modern origin, yet he would cleave to it as having undoubted evidence of being the Word of God.

And when the children of God fall into darkness, are sorely buffeted by Satan, and have skeptical thoughts injected into their minds, their deliverance does not come from reasoning and reading books

on the evidences of Christianity, but by the shining of the truth itself into the heart. One ray from the Sun of righteousness will scatter a darkness that has long been oppressive; one gracious promise applied and sealed on the heart will bring peace when all other resources fail. Let those who are slow to believe these things contemplate the patience, the courage, the joy, and the triumph of the martyrs of Jesus in the early times of the gospel. Where did this superhuman contempt of torture and of death come from? Where did the elevated joy come from experienced by some in the midst of racks and flames? The sight of such effects as these multiplied converts to Christianity at a time when the very name was punished with a cruel death.

These effects of the gospel have not entirely ceased, even in our day. Even new converts have manifested a Christian fortitude and cheerful resignation to cruel sufferings for the sake of Christ. And how

often have those who have had much experience near the beds of dying saints been filled with wonder and gratitude at the power of the Word of God, when accompanied by His Spirit, to support and console the departing spirit—even when the body was racked with excruciating pain! The evidence arising from such scenes is often not only convincing but overwhelming. I have often wished, when witnessing such scenes, that unbelievers could be present to see the wonderful truth of the gospel giving peace and joy to people in the agonies of death.

I remember an obscure young woman who was so reserved and modest that very few people knew anything of her pious exercises until she was laid on the bed of death. Though poor and obscure, she was not ignorant nor uncultivated; far from it. She had a mind of uncommon intelligence, which, by reading, she had stored with knowledge, especially pious knowledge. The Bible was her daily com-

panion and the source of all her comfort. She understood the doctrines of Christianity not only theoretically, but experimentally. She had felt their power. She had daily proof of their efficacy to support the soul under peculiar trials. I had known nothing of the elevation and fervency of her piety until called to visit her in her last sickness, when, instead of giving instruction and comfort to the dying saint, I felt it to be one of the highest privileges I ever enjoyed—to witness the heavenly serenity of her countenance, and to hear the expressions of faith and hope which flowed from her lips.

From what has been said, we may derive the following inferences.

1. That unrenewed men who are not taught of God, however they may by learning and the exercise of reason arrive at the conclusion that the Holy Scriptures are given by inspiration and contain a true revelation of the will of God, yet

never can attain to a true, saving faith; for we are saved "by grace...through faith; and that not of ourselves: it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). We see the reason why a merely rational or historical faith does not work by love nor produce any radical change in the character: because by it, however clear and strong, the excellence and beauty and glory of Christ and divine things are not revealed to the mind. The blind man may be as fully convinced of the existence of the rainbow as any other person, and may assent to the fact that what are called colors are exhibited in this phenomenon; but he is incapable of the emotions produced in the minds of those who can see by this sublime and beautiful arch in the heavens. And in this case, there may be a certain conviction of a truth when the evidence which produces it does not present to the mind the true nature of that truth. So it is in regard to spiritual things; people who are spiritually blind to their nature

may, by conclusive arguments and testimony, be convinced of their reality.

2. We learn also that, where there is a sincere love of truth and a pious disposition to be conformed to the will of God, both by believing what His Word declares and doing what it commands, there is true faith. Hence it may be inferred that the person possessing such a state of mind in regard to the truths of the Bible has been enlightened by the Spirit of God. A ray from Christ, "the light of the world," has shined into his heart to give him the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. True knowledge and pious affections are inseparably joined; the one cannot exist without the other. The views of the understanding and the purposes of the heart, from the constitution of the mind, must be in concurrence. But the affections and volitions of the heart are not in concurrence with the

mere speculative convictions of the understanding, for reasons already given.

Hence we see clearly the true ground of difference between a dead and a living faith: it is owing entirely to the different kinds of evidence on which they are respectively founded. In the one case, the evidence, though convincing, does not afford to the mind a view of the real spiritual nature of the truths believed. In the other, the evidence is the excellence and spiritual beauty of the objects of faith. In the one case, the evidence is external to the truth; in the other, it is the internal shining of the truth into the mind.

3. Finally, when faith is weak, the true method of strengthening it is not to be found in logical reasoning, but in divine illumination. There are doubts, which may be removed by a careful and impartial investigation of the evidences of divine revelation; but this may be effected without any real increase of true faith.

True faith can only be invigorated by the same efficient Agent by whom it was first produced. All the most vigorous efforts of human reason in the most gifted minds can never produce one true spiritual idea. This dependence of the soul on God for every step of progress in the divine life is beautifully illustrated in the prophet Isaiah: "He gives power to the weary; and to them who have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up on wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they will walk, and not faint" (Isa. 40:29-31).

Let all then who wish to know whether the doctrines of Christ are true pray for the illumination of the Holy Spirit; let them get their minds into that state which is favorable for the clear discovery of the truth, and they will find that, as the light of the sun needs no witnesses to testify

of its existence, when it shines into the eyes, so, when obstructions are removed and the intellect is prepared to receive spiritual ideas, the light of truth shining into the mind carries its own evidence with it!

The man thus enlightened, has no need that anyone should testify to him of the truth, for he perceives the light and tastes the sweetness of the truth, as it is in Jesus. The more the believer grows in grace, the firmer and more efficacious will be his faith. As the Spirit is freely given in answer to prayer, we should unceasingly cry to God for this richest, this sum of all spiritual blessings. The indwelling of the Spirit is the rich fountain of life from which all holy acts and spiritual exercises and enjoyments proceed. In accordance with the thoughts and reasonings in the preceding discourse are the facts in the case. Converts among the heathen, in whom the moral change is so remarkable, are not convinced of the

truth of the gospel by being made acquainted with its external evidences, of which they are as yet incapable, but by its internal light and power by which their consciences are awakened and the demerit of sin and the efficacy of the promises of the gospel to relieve and compose their troubled minds are felt. And, among men of strong and highly cultivated minds, more have been converted from infidelity by reading the Scriptures than by studying the external evidences.

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